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Fragments Shored against Ruins

Denis Byrne's *Surface Collection*

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These fragments I have shored against my ruins.¹

There is a kind of travel writing that dwells upon cross-cultural interaction and the experience of displacement, those 'crucial sites for an unfinished modernity'.² Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh*, W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, Stephen Muecke's *No Road* or, in a forensic and culinary mode, Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily*, are in this vein.³ Many of the best examples have been written by anthropologists: Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* come to mind.⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss's compelling meditation on his anthropological travels in South America, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), has provided the most influential model.⁵ *Tristes Tropiques* displays all the characteristic features of the genre: an exotic setting, both enticing and disorientating; culture shock celebrated as a path to insight and wisdom; and an ironic and valedictory voice, partly a reflection of traveller's loneliness, but also related to a darkening sense of historical or moral failure. This failure may be

ascribed to modernity, as Clifford implies—the cultural depredations of colonialism, nationalism, and technological change—but its expression often points beyond contingent political and social conditions, to something inherent in life itself—the failure of language to communicate, of culture to satisfy, or to the blank inevitability of change, loss and death: to what Buddhists call *durka*.

Denis Byrne describes his contribution to the genre with characteristic precision:

I had just spent four years researching and writing on the subject of heritage management for my doctorate, and a lot of this had involved thinking about deterioration, decay, abandonment, and ruin in relation to ‘built heritage’. Then in the lull following this work I started to think about the ways in which our own lives are also permeated by the experience of loss.⁶

Surface Collection is a juggling act that keeps several curiously assorted balls felicitously in the air. It is a wry and charming travelogue, a linked series of provocative studies of Southeast Asian histories and cultures, and an evocative meditation on transience and humanity’s attempts to resist, assist or accept it. It is also exquisitely written.⁷ Perhaps such books are best savoured in transit. I read it in India, where mobile phones and pujas, shantytowns beneath billboards plugging infrastructure investment, the gargantuan energy of Mumbai and the decaying mansions of Goa, provided a fitting accompaniment to its themes.

Rabinow explained the purpose of *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* by quoting Ricoeur: ‘the comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other’.⁸ Byrne too is interested in the self, and vividly sketches his own: a sympathetic and perceptive *flaneur*, very conscious of his clothing, his accoutrements and his body, liable to states of slightly faux perplexity or indecision, frequently in the company of or in the process of connecting with a male companion whose clothes, ornaments, tattoos and so on are duly noted. He wants us to know he is a true cosmopolitan, both in the everyday sense of someone who feels more or less at home in a wide variety of cultural contexts, and also in the more rarefied sense of being a self-conscious ‘citizen of the world’ to whom ‘nothing human is alien’, one who not only accepts the human but identifies with it. Byrne’s philosophical cosmopolitanism is of the ‘thick’ variety: he strives to respect all

differences and to engage in open dialogue with everyone.⁹ These aspirations are noble ones, and challenging.

Though the destination of travel may be the self, the route it takes goes via 'the comprehension of the other'. *Surface Collection* exhibits many 'others'—there are glimpses of half a dozen or so Southeast Asian cultures—but its abiding topic is not a place but an activity: the business of heritage conservation. One way of describing the book would be to say that it probes and deconstructs heritage practice, in the hope of encouraging archaeologists and conservationists to reflect on their professional values.

I am not an archaeologist, a conservationist, nor any kind of museum person, and so felt free to read *Surface Collection* in my own way. It set me thinking about impermanence and desire, to ponder the persistence of magic in modernity, and to wonder about the nature of our attachment to what has gone into the 'dark backward and abysm of time'.¹⁰ I suppose we cling to the past because it makes us what we are. Without memory, the self is always at groundhog day, a random jumble of sensations and habits. And not only our individual consciousnesses, but also those larger selves we call families, communities, networks, cities, nations, co-religionists and humanity; and why not animals as well, or the whole biosphere? Conservation is a way of clinging to the past, but like so many desires—like all desire, insist the Buddhists—it is destined for failure. At varying rates, the remains of the past are always turning inexorably into something else, most often into microbes and dust.

—THE CONSERVATION OF HERITAGE

Until the eighteenth century, when museums began to be imagined and built, reverence for the past usually assumed continuity between it and the present. Old things retained the meanings and uses which they originally had, or were believed to have had. If they were valued, they were valued because those who had made them were closer to the beginning, to the forgoers who had laid down the paths of virtuous living. 'I transmit, I invent nothing,' Confucius claimed, 'I trust and love the past.'¹¹ Timber temples in Japan are still regularly rebuilt according to their original plan. At Ise, this has been done every twenty years since the seventh century. It is not the age of the building's *fabric* that is valued, but the age of its *form*.

Heritage conservation reveres the past rather differently. Contemporary conservationists wince at the thought of completely destroying a heritage building, no matter how decayed, to replace it with a replica. They will try to preserve what they can of it, because it is the material fabric of a building that is understood to constitute its primary link to the past. Far from according value to heritage because its original meanings and uses are expressed in a pure form, the whole rationale of conservationism is that heritage is endangered because its original meanings and uses have been lost.

Heritage conservation is historicist. It deems the past worthy of saving not because it is like the present, but because it is different, and different in a way that has didactic value. Visiting the past is like visiting another country. It fascinates, inspires or comforts us, stimulates our distaste or empathy, our judgement and our curiosity. It makes us better human beings. Powerfully voiced by John Ruskin and William Morris, this Romantic conception of the past gave rise to conservation policies in industrial states and their settler colonies by the second half of the nineteenth century. The British National Trust and national parks in the USA, Australia and New Zealand were among its earliest achievements.

No more eloquent testimony to conservationism's deeply ingrained historicism exists than David Chipperfield's virtuoso reimagining of Friedrich Stüler's Neues Museum, the most elegant of pre-war Berlin's museums, built between 1843 and 1855. Most of its collections were saved, but the Neues Museum was a ruined shell in 1945, and remained so for decades until it was reborn in 2009. The new building incorporates shell and bullet damage from the war as well as what survives of the original rooms and murals. Some of the rebuilt areas use bricks from mid nineteenth-century Berlin. Some of the totally destroyed sections of the building have been rebuilt in an emphatically contemporary idiom, making it even more obvious that is not an antiquarian pastiche of the past but an historical one: it wants us to see the past from the vantage of the present. This museum's most extraordinary exhibit is itself, to whose tragic history it testifies.¹²

After the massive destruction of World War II and subsequent urban and industrial development, heritage consciousness grew rapidly, and it expanded its field and scope of operations. In 1964 the International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments drafted the Venice Charter, setting out

international guidelines for the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites. The newly formed International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) adopted the Venice Charter in the following year, and together with subsequent charters and declarations adapted to local circumstances it has become an influential template for heritage practice and its legislative regulation.¹³ One of its supplements is the Burra Charter (1979), drafted by the Australian branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in the context of political struggles over Aboriginal land rights and sacred sites. The Burra Charter is particularly concerned to take account of non-architectural sites. Its key concept is 'cultural significance', defined as 'aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations'. Significant sites are those that 'enrich' people's lives, provide 'a deep and inspirational sense of connection' and are tangible expressions of 'identity and experience'.¹⁴

Prodded by a multitude of claims and interests, in recent decades the concept of heritage has been democratised, environmentalised and rarefied. The heritage of 'common people' has been accorded a place alongside the heritage of elites; growing understanding of natural and cultural ecologies has compelled recognition that protecting heritage involves protecting the environments that sustain it, and not only the natural but also the human ones; and so, logically, a 2003 UNESCO Convention extends heritage to include 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills'.¹⁵ Today, conservation is a global ideology, sustained by far-reaching institutional, educational and business networks. As I write this there are 890 sites on the UNESCO's World Heritage List—no doubt there will be more by the time you read it.¹⁶ The list includes the surviving monuments of Old Goa in India. Near a gigantic structure built by Portuguese invaders more than four centuries ago called 'Sé Cathedral' (a name which is like 'Akbar the Great'), there is a sign in Hindi and English headed 'Slogans on Cultural Heritage':

These monuments are of exceptional interest and of universal value, their protection is the concern of all mankind ...

The present generation has a sacred duty to preserve, protect and pass on the monumental heritage intact to the posterity ...

This cultural treasure is your inheritance prevere it and rejoice.

‘Prevere’, a felicitous amalgam of ‘preserve’ and ‘revere’ captures exactly what heritage conservation is all about.

—THE SURFACE AND THE UNDERGROUND

Australia has a robust heritage ‘industry’, which as manager of cultural heritage research in the New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change (until recently named Environment and Conservation) the archaeologist Denis Byrne has observed and participated in for a long time.¹⁷ He has published extensively on Australian heritage, place, memory, indigeneity and racism.¹⁸ *Surface Collection*, however, is concerned with the hot, crowded, fertile lands north of Australia. Its path inscribes a lopsided ‘W’ through Southeast Asia, beginning in Manila and Central Luzon, winging south to linger in Bali, moving northwest to Vung Tau in Vietnam and Fang in Northern Thailand, and finally to ferry up the Irrawady to Pagan and Mount Popa. Along the way, Byrne considers ten cases, each of which illustrates a set of responses or lack of responses to traces of the past in the landscape, and the varying consequences of acts of preservation, restoration or obliteration.

Surface Collection is a closely interwoven whole, but can be divided into three distinct sections. The first four chapters are a set of relatively self-contained essays about the Philippines and Bali, particularly concerned with the obliteration of traces of destruction—of a war, an earthquake, and a genocide. The next three chapters, mainly set in Vietnam, are organised around futile quests for fantastical ‘traces’—a perfume, a coastline, a seawall. At the end of this section we return to the traces of destruction: the Vietnam War. The concluding section, set in Northern Thailand and Pagan, addresses issues of heritage context and conflicts over the conservation of magical and spiritual artefacts.

The structure of the book reminded me of a late Baroque musical form, best known through the compositions of J.S. Bach.¹⁹ A *prelude*—or perhaps more precisely for this case a *passacaglia* (literally a ‘street walking’), a composition based on a fixed harmonic pattern—introduces a *fugue*, in which related melodic lines are heard simultaneously. The whole piece then concludes with a *coda* in which the foregoing material is brought to apotheosis.

The 'fixed harmonic pattern' that runs through the passacaglia of the first four chapters is a 'notion of the underground as a hidden dimension of the surface', aligning the idea of 'underground' with its secret and subversive connotations.²⁰ Most of the undergrounds Byrne encounters are 'traumascapes': war, volcanic eruption, massacre.²¹ They are typically camouflaged, inaccessible, forbidden and all but erased. Yet their fragments still register on the textures of ordinary, apparently 'innocent' surfaces, like bullet marks on the walls of buildings. As the book's playful name implies, *Surface Collection* is concerned with such unconcealed traces.²² Byrne coyly eschews depth. Asked by an Australian veteran at Vung Tau whether he has visited the Vietcong tunnel system at Chu Chi, he responds that 'I didn't like tunnels, not that kind anyhow (I was more of a surface type)'.²³ In this repartee there is a very faint echo of Alphonso Lingis's elegant essay on deep sea diving, sex and cultural theory: 'libidinal life should not be pictured, topographically, as a depth of inward life. It is superficial, all surface ... The libidinal zone is the skin—skin and the mucous orifices that prolong it inward.'²⁴

—TRAUMATIC PASSACAGLIA: FOUR CASES

Case 1: Manila. An urban precinct is destroyed by war. Later it is partially restored, but the event of its destruction is glossed over.

The opening chapter takes the reader to the sixteenth-century Spanish Old Town of Manila, the *intramuros*, which was almost completely destroyed by American artillery at the end of the war in the Pacific, along with perhaps one hundred thousand civilians held hostage there by the Japanese army. Today few if any traces of this politically uncomfortable tragedy remain. There are no signs, no monuments. After the war, the ruins became a shantytown until the Marcos government decided to restore it in the 1980s, although a handful of significant buildings and structures were rebuilt, among them the 1930s Congress Building, now the National Museum. So 'authentic' was this 1951 restoration (broken windows, malfunctioning plumbing, air conditioning not working) that Byrne spent several weeks working there without realising that the building was not the original one. Initial confusion at seeing it reduced to a heap of rubble in a 1945 photograph he came across years later, he tells us, was 'gradually replaced by an odd sense of lightness'.²⁵

Case 2: Northern Luzon. Ongoing efforts to preserve a landscape take place against the tide of economic and social change.

Northern Luzon is renowned for its rice terraces, sculpted from steep hillsides. The Igorot people who made them, head-hunters who in pre-Christian times went nearly naked and possessed a rich ensemble of crafts, were favourite targets of ethnographic interest and popular exoticisation in the nineteenth century. The terraces at Banaue, thousands of years old, are particularly spectacular. The region is a UNESCO world heritage site, and attracts hordes of visitors. However, the terraces, which need constant maintenance, are threatened by neglect and erosion. Work in the thriving tourist industry, or in Manila, has more appeal than backbreaking work in the fields. By 2001, more than a quarter had been abandoned.

What is to be done? A heritage conservationist has written in support of a strategy of 'cultural revival' for the Ivatans of the Batanes Islands, north of Luzon, which has similar problems. In 2000 there was a government 'campaign to make the Ivatans understand the unique significance of their natural and cultural heritage'. Accordingly, a program was introduced to persuade the Ivatans to keep on with their traditional occupations, stay in their old uncomfortable houses of stone and thatch instead of building new ones from concrete and corrugated iron, and stop dropping garbage all over the landscape, all of which would be very helpful for the local tourist industry.²⁶

'Behind all of this is the difficulty that heritage practitioners have with the idea of authenticity', Byrne muses. 'We want "authentic" culture and authentic-looking terraces. But the truly authentic is, of course, always already there in front of us, in the present.'²⁷

Case 3: Bali. A landscape is destroyed by a volcanic eruption. Within a few decades, evidence of the destruction has all but disappeared.

Case 4: Bali. Elements of a landscape, and many people, are destroyed by pogroms. Immediately afterwards, evidence of the pogroms is suppressed.

Bali's charming surface, which attracts three million or so tourists annually, masks a lurid and violent history. Chapters 3 and 4 of Byrne's book are concerned with two

traumatic episodes of recent decades. The island's largest volcano, Gunung Agung, erupted in 1963, destroying villages, killing over a thousand people and creating economic havoc. Two years later, massacres, incarcerations and destruction followed a failed (or supposed) coup by members of the Indonesian Communist Party. The 1965 killings initially targeted members of the Communist Party, but included many others, especially ethnic Chinese. The pogroms perhaps killed a hundred times more people than the volcano, but by the 1990s Byrne could discern scarcely a trace of either event on the landscape. They had been obliterated by 'structures of forgetting', regrowth, and new building: Byrne drops a rumour that a luxury tourist hotel is built on a mass grave.

—FUGUE OF TRACES: FOUR CASES

Midway through, *Surface Collection* shifts gear and develops into a rather hallucinatory fugue. Issues and locations are no longer confined to chapters, but bleed across them and overlap. Rather than the archaeologist seeking traces of the past, it begins to seem that the traces might be seeking him. Their connection with past events becomes tenuous if not fantastical. The compulsive fascination they hold for the narrator, and his capricious and futile pursuit of them, ironically underscore the emotional and fortuitous underpinnings of archaeology. What exactly is it that the traces are traces *of*? It is now as if we are inside a dream—the unsettling dream of a heritage archaeologist—where prevailing assumptions and expectations become fanciful and the whimsical acquires the patina of normality. Landscapes—along with everything else—dissolve even as we observe and sift through them, rice fields dissolving into sea, dust turning to dust. Only we, with our unpredictable desires and our imaginations, can give them meanings, but the meanings remain elusive and ephemeral.

The surface/underground dichotomy also slips away. 'Archaeologists may be inclined to make a too-strict distinction between the surface and the underground.'²⁸ Sometimes undergrounds spill out of hiding, or surfaces go underground. On the shore's edge of the eroding north coast of Bali, people walk through the foundations of structures now gone. 'The past was a ghostly surface they now walked beneath rather than upon.'²⁹ 'In the cliff face, if you looked carefully, was the odd shard of Chinese porcelain, blue and white, along with shards of the local earthenware...' In

Luzon, the spectacular terraces, maintained on the surface by ongoing struggle against new economic and political realities, might soon disappear underground, like the leaders of a failed junta.

Whether tunnelling in the underground or mucking about on the surface, it is the business of archaeology to find and interpret traces of decay, and it makes use of whatever techniques seem useful for that task. Archaeology is a synthetic and diagnostic science. There are no axioms, no 'laws of archaeology' as there are of physics. It is all about getting hold of fragments and trying to make sense of them. Although a few fragments endure for thousands or even billions of years, the attrition rate of things is extremely high. *Surface Collection* shows repeatedly how quickly traces of the past can be erased. Physical evidence of traumatic events within living memory for which there is ample documentary evidence has already all but disappeared: the destruction of Old Manila, the eruption of Gunung Agung, the Indonesian massacres. Even when traces do survive, their connection to the past is seldom obvious. They require interpretation, which for a short time relies on personal memories, and after that on traditions and procedures handed from generation to generation. Both of these are inconstant. Memory fades and invents, even when the past is a 'living reality', as it is for many pilgrims to sacred sites and survivors of atrocities. Traditions and procedures evolve or devolve. Eventually past events can only be detected, acknowledged and understood—or, as also happens, debunked—by 'experts'.

In the past experts were usually priests or dilettantes. These days they are mostly archaeologists and historians. Experts decode traces of the past in the light of their professional knowledge. They work out the meaning of traces by referring to their understandings of what happened in the past and how things can survive. Context, it seems, is all. Yet context cannot be all. Not only must there eventually be an end to it—for what of the context of the context, and its context?—but what counts as context is disconcertingly contingent. Byrne parodies the idea of context even as he acknowledges its necessity. Unable to sleep one steamy night in Bali in the 1990s, he flips through press stories of March 1963, the month of Gunung Agung's eruption, scanning for clues, for relevant information about or reaction to the calamity. Singapore had started rationing water, the Profumo affair was rocking British politics, the French government tested a nuclear weapon in the Sahara, and

Sydney announced a plan to demolish the Rocks area. 'Meanwhile, Queen Elizabeth was making her way majestically down the WA coast in the royal yacht Britannia ... Like me, she might have lain awake in the night, listening to the sea and wondering if she was getting the most out of life.'³⁰

Case 5: Bali. An olfactory trace has significance for the archaeologist, though its heritage value and historical consequence is debatable.

The first theme of Byrne's fugue is Shalimar, a 'classic' perfume, named after the renowned gardens built in Lahore in the seventeenth century by Shah Jahan (also on UNESCO's World Heritage site list), and launched by Jacques Guerlain in 1925.

In the wake of the mass murders of 1965, President Sukarno was deposed and kept under house arrest by General Suharto's new regime. In an atmosphere of intense political repression, Sukarno, whose mother was Balinese, retained immense popular charisma. In traditional communities, seeing fallen leaders in the moon is a relatively safe expression of allegiance in politically troubled times. Byrne cites an entry in Donald Friend's diary noting that one night in 1967, three years before his death, 'villagers in masses stood about viewing, on the face of the moon, President Sukarno's portrait'.³¹ (Somewhat eerily, while I was reading *Surface Collection*, a parallel of this incident appeared in the *Times of India*. During the Pakistani elections in February 2008, 'a rumour spread in large parts of Sindh that one could see [assassinated presidential candidate] Benazir Bhutto's face on the moon... 'Yes, yes, I saw her face on the moon,' said a man, weeping uncontrollably. "Bibi is not dead. She is alive," said another'.)³²

One of the few personal items in Sukarno's possession when he died in Bali in 1970 was a bottle of Shalimar. A trace. But a trace of what? Does it contain a revelation of lost time, like the famous madeleine in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*? Byrne seems inclined to hope so, but instead it takes him on a slightly furtive and completely fruitless excursion to Sukarno's Balinese villa. Perhaps Shalimar is no more than a trace of Byrne's—or Sukarno's—orientalist hankerings. Instead it becomes the vehicle for a wry visual comment on archaeological pretensions to objectivity. On page 105 of *Surface Collection* there is a photograph captioned 'Field kit': a photograph of Sukarno's villa, books about him, a compass, and a bottle of Shalimar.

Case 6: Bali. An émigré couple live on an eroding coastline. Their house will be taken by the sea.

Case 7: French Indochina. A woman in a novel set in French Indochina tries to save her land from the encroaching sea by building a seawall. She fails. The archaeologist fails to locate the site.

Case 8: Vietnam. Against the historical tide, US troops and allies, including Australia, attempt to save Vietnam from communist nationalism. They fail. Today sites and monuments commemorate the war, but for at least one veteran they fail completely to convey its reality.

We meet an expatriate couple living in Bali, Canadian and Javanese expatriates. They have built a house perched on the sea cliff at Yeh Saneh, a small beach resort near the old Dutch capital Singaraja. The coastline is eroding, and the house is beginning to disintegrate. The threat of the encroaching sea, and the ultimate vanity of attempts to resist it, seems symbolic of other attempts to resist dissolution. It reminds Byrne of a novel by Marguerite Duras, *The Seawall*, set in 1930s Vietnam, in which a widowed French woman based on Duras's own mother dreams of salvaging her dire economic situation by growing rice on a useless government land grant. The land is inundated by the tides, so she decides to gamble all her resources and build a seawall, which crumbles in a night. She 'makes the mistake of believing "her" coastline to be a hard line rather than an unstable zone'.³³

Suddenly we are in Vietnam, where Byrne is seeking, in a decidedly unfocused way, the location of the novel's seawall, presumably also the location of Duras's mother's land grant. He lacks sufficient information. He decides to go to Vung Tau, where he encounters traces of another hopeless project—Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Surreally, he also encounters an empty bottle of Shalimar in a bric-a-brac shop in Vung Tau, which the shopkeeper offers him for \$20. 'I was tempted, but context is everything.'³⁴ He chats with an Australian veteran living in Vietnam who is confused that the Vietnamese are making money from Australian visitors to war sites. The man has a heavy presence, scathing and sad. The visitors 'see nothing that tells them there was a war here ... Sometimes I wonder whether I didn't just imagine the bloody thing', he exclaims angrily.³⁵ There is a presentiment of his bewilderment in the earlier discussion of the Northern Luzon rice terraces. A Japanese soldier, Tetsuo Ogawa, was stranded there with remnants of the Japanese army in 1945. In his memoir Ogawa recalled being on a later visit

'haunted by the absence of traces that seemed to deny it had ever been the scene of any catastrophe'.³⁶

The search for Duras's seawall never gets properly started and is soon abandoned. Probably, Byrne concludes, it wasn't in Vietnam at all, but Cambodia—which, as it happens, Duras's biographer had already established.³⁷ On this inconclusive note, the fugue ends.

—CODA OF SACRED CONTEXTS: TWO CASES

Case 9: Northern Thailand. A Norwegian scientist removes forgotten and decaying Buddhist heritage from the jungle, against some resistance from the local population.

In a long coda, reminders of already enunciated themes are overlaid with exhilarating new gestures. The final chapter, 'The Divine Underground', turns from loss of the physical fabric of the past to the loss of its meaning, to the disappearance of the cultural and spiritual contexts that make it comprehensible. The small town of Fang in Northern Thailand, close by the Burmese border, lies in the midst of the ruins of a once-rich ritual centre. The nearby jungle is littered with derelict temples and stupas. The cover of *Surface Collection* displays such an object, an evocative photograph of a damaged stone Buddha in a neighbouring region of Thailand, taken (like most of the book's photographs) by the author. In an overgrown stone niche, a headless torso meditates, its only intact arm touching the earth to bear witness. Nearby its severed head leans on the podium, a world-weary smile hovering on dainty lips.

For the people of Fang, such images contain a potent magic. The rediscovery of buried Buddha images in Thailand is frequently heralded by miracles, believed to be signs of the statues making their presence felt. However, for the nineteenth-century Norwegian naturalist and collector Carl Bock the forgotten images were effectively 'deconsecrated'. He saw no problem with taking the statues back to Norway to be studied for their beauty and historical interest, which caused conflict with the locals.

Byrne is careful not to oversimplify this familiar colonial scenario. He notes that there is no general Buddhist or Thai embargo on taking sacred objects from sacred places. Many middle-class Thais, along with foreign collectors, buy objects

looted from archaeological sites. Perhaps a more diplomatic collector than Bock, one who displayed more respect for the Buddha images, could have removed them without protest. The point of the story is not to criticise collecting, but to shift the focus from the generalised 'cultural significance' conferred upon objects by heritage conservation, to the more precise and eerie 'sacred power' conferred upon religious artefacts by their creators and users.

Case 10. Pagan, Burma. The customary rebuilding of religious monuments is forbidden; the sacred life that created them may be driven underground, but pulses on.

Finally, Byrne recounts a riverboat trip from Mandalay to Pagan. Near Pagan, stupas are thickly scattered across a great plain—over two thousand of them, each said to contain a fragment of Sakyamuni, the mysterious sixth-century BCE philosopher and mystic who founded Buddhism. The relics have magical properties: they are able to reproduce themselves, which is how there come to be so many of them, even though Sakyamuni was cremated thousands of years ago. Also, 'the radiant power of a relic will infuse the physical fabric of the stupa that encases it with power', which explains why dilapidated stupas can be encased in new layers of brick and stucco, 'like Russian dolls', and retain their holiness.³⁸ This is not a procedure likely to appeal to heritage enthusiasts, who are more inclined to remove layers from old things than to add to them.

Buddhists believe that one of the ways they can earn merit and attain a better rebirth is to build or rebuild stupas, but these days, when good craft workers are in short supply, new and rebuilt stupas are seldom as beautiful as the old ones. In any case, in the eyes of outsiders new stupas lack the exotic dignity of age. Since colonial times the Burmese government has permitted only minimal alteration to the major stupas. Byrne had the impression that they were deliberately kept looking ancient as part of an attempt, motivated by conservationism, to remove archaeological sites from religious practice. 'The divine becomes a kind of underground in the landscape of heritage.'³⁹

Not everyone agrees that the Burmese regime is motivated by conservationist concerns. Although UNESCO has assisted in the conservation of some of the Pagan monuments, Burma is the only nation of any size to have no sites at all on the World Heritage list. Even North Korea has one. Around the time of

Byrne's visit in 2005, the regime embarked on a program of 'improvements' to the site (restorations, a highway, a golf course, and a viewing tower and hotel complex) that provoked widespread protests.⁴⁰

At any rate, the 'divine underground' hides itself rather carelessly at Pagan: Coloured fairy lights have been arranged to represent rays of radiating light emanating from the heads of the small Buddha images situated at the base of the monumental statue of the Buddha that fills the chamber [in the stupa]. Long after we tourists have gone back to our hotels, the electric aureoles inside this and other stupas on the night-time plain of Pagan continue pulsing.⁴¹

From the first, *Surface Collection* lists towards this closing vision of Buddhist enchantment, even in its religious geography, which subtly, perhaps innocently, shifts from Philippine Catholicism to Balinese Hinduism, the Mahayana of Vietnam, and on to Thai and Burmese Theravada. The route displays a sequence of religious attitudes to worldly things, on a trajectory that fits the book's ironic structure of feeling and seems to double the author's deepening disquiet about heritage conservation. Christianity, while offering salvation, accords the world independent reality and significance; on the other hand, the karmic religions deem the sensory world illusory, and Buddhism affirms that it is not only illusory but positively harmful: in clinging to it we doom ourselves to eternal suffering. Tibetan monks dramatically demonstrate the point by destroying in a few seconds the sand mandalas that they have laboured painstakingly for days to create. 'There is suffering but no sufferer,' wrote the fourth century Theravada philosopher Buddhagosa,

There is the deed but no doer,
Extinction is, but none who is extinct,
There is no walker, only the Way.⁴²

Popular Theravada Buddhism, rather than encouraging its adherents to emulate Sakyamuni's driven quest for Enlightenment, is dominated by what Melford Spiro calls apotropaic and kammatic practices—magical rituals to ward off evil in this life and ensure better ones in future.⁴³ Like nearly all magic, these rituals 'work' through metonymy and metaphor. The proximity of the Buddhas of Pagan to a relic that was once a part of or connected to the body of Sakyamuni charges them with contagious

magic. This is metonymic and synecdochal thinking, substituting contiguous things for one another and parts for wholes. The Buddhas also possess homeopathic magic by virtue of their physical resemblance to Sakyamuni, or by representing his pose on achieving Nirvana or at crucial stages on the way. This is metaphorical thinking, taking the representation for the represented.

Metonymy and metaphor can only *transmit*: they cannot be magical source. Some things are pure magic. Their power is not imparted by contiguity or similarity, but is intrinsic to them, or so we think. Proust's madeleine induces a sort of Nirvana:

a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory.⁴⁴

The madeleine is an example of a fetish, 'an entity crystallized into an object beyond value, possessing an unexchangeable singularity'.⁴⁵ In choosing those flashing 'electric aureoles' of the Pagan Buddhas as his closing chord, Byrne evokes *auras*, the outward signs of magic that inheres in things and radiates from them. They are a reminder that fetishes are at the heart of the human.

—MAGIC AND MODERNITY

Byrne is critical of the antipathy of heritage conservation to magic, an antipathy largely shared by contemporary Southeast Asian governments. He depicts heritage conservation as a 'child of the Reformation', an intrinsically desacralising practice born of scientific rationality out of Protestant iconoclasm. It 'seems unmoved and uninterested in the fact that the majority of the world's population lives in an enchanted world in which old objects and places are animated by a "barely comprehensible virtuosity"'.⁴⁶ This judgement particularly colours his discussion of Carl Bock, who was both a scientist, 'predisposed to ridicule the idea that statues were magically empowered', and from Norway, where 'the miraculous efficacy of objects was an idea that the Protestant Reformation had consigned to history'.⁴⁷ This is where I felt myself beginning to depart from Byrne, whose argument relies on a very literal version of Weberian disenchantment, tying the iron cage of modernity tightly to Protestant abstraction. It comes close to implying the hypothesis, beloved

of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century armchair anthropologists, that pre-modernity is pervaded by a special way of thinking, 'pre-scientific thought' or 'primitive mentality'.

However, the Protestant ethic and scientific rationality have not been the only historical antagonists of magic. The ruling elites of many civilizations have displayed ambivalence or outright scepticism about it. Chinese empires were particularly suspicious: the persecution of Falun Gong is only the latest episode in a history of conflict with popular superstition that goes back at least to the Daoist Yellow Turban rebellion that helped bring down the Han Empire. Perhaps elite discomfort with magic stemmed from their cosmopolitan experiences, which stimulated an appetite for universalistic ideas and fostering an appreciation of abstract, unchanging principles, like dharma, reciprocity, fate, God's will, or scientific law. Magic, which breaks the normal patterns of the accustomed world, sits awkwardly with these universalising concepts. As well, the materialism and sensationalism of magic can mark it as 'low', beneath the dignity of the wise.

The tension was sometimes resolved by reassigning magical practices and the stories associated with them from the realm of supernatural technique to the realm of sacred or poetic symbolism, as Hellenistic philosophers did for classical mythology,⁴⁸ or to the realm of the socially therapeutic, as Confucius did for sacrificial rites.⁴⁹ The core doctrines of the great world religions, which brought them acceptance by the elites of many cultures, imply that magical events are manifestations of higher truths. Jesus was a miracle worker, but his feats are presented as signs of divinity, not as displays of magic. Long before Luther and Calvin, Augustine condemned astrology.⁵⁰ The eighth-century Eastern Roman Emperor Leo III and his bishops smashed icons believed to have healing properties, citing the First Commandment. Neither Gautama nor Muhammad is attributed magical powers by their orthodox traditions, though marvellous events counterpointed their activities. The more traditional and intellectual strands of Buddhism, like that favoured by the nineteenth Thai King Monkut, do not place much credit on supernatural interventions. The Taliban's notorious destruction of the statues at Bamiyan may have been an extreme expression of Islam's antipathy to things that might distract believers from God, but it was no more outlandish than Leo III's iconoclasm.

Despite the reservations of their elites, premodern states rarely attacked popular magic directly, and sometimes encouraged it, especially since it often helped to shore up their legitimacy.⁵¹ But things are different today. The modern nation state seeks not only to govern, but also to strengthen, enrich and educate. It constructs itself as a transformative agent, disseminating elite understandings throughout society. That, rather than emulation of Western secularism, seems to me to be the motivation for contemporary 'state-driven campaigns against "superstition"'.⁵²

Westerners sometimes express surprise that witchcraft is still taken seriously by many in many parts of the world, that some Asian political leaders consult astrologists before making important political decisions, or that the modernising, atheistic rulers of China made sure the 2008 Olympic Games opened on a numerologically auspicious date. Yet magic remains alive and well everywhere, not only in Meskell's 'enchanted world', but also in the world that we all, West, East, North and South, actually inhabit. Campaigns against it are at best provisional, like the equally longstanding and not unrelated campaigns against gambling, markets, bribery, intoxicants, and proscribed sexualities. Where there is desire, people seek fulfilment. Magic may have ceded some ground in some spheres, notably in the organisation and transformation of production, but it has adapted itself happily to many new spheres, and magical thinking infuses sport, politics, fashion, celebrity, advertising, tourism, the arts, and the pursuit of 'good living'.⁵³ Byrne comes close to acknowledging the point when he tells how his Burmese friend identified the heads of Mount Rushmore as American *nats*, the pre-Buddhist spirits that still loom large in the lives of most Burmese. 'How did one explain Mount Rushmore in purely secular terms?' he wonders.⁵⁴ How indeed? 'Is not society', asks Bruno Latour, 'built literally—not metaphorically—of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles?'.⁵⁵

Far from desacralising the past, it seems to me that heritage conservation lays a grid of sacred power upon it. Scientific rationality has influenced its techniques, but at heart it is a commemorative thaumaturgy. Perhaps not exactly magic, depending on how you define magic, but close enough. Like magic, heritage conservation ascribes power to things because of their metonymic or metaphorical connection with other things. As fragments—original artefacts and buildings—heritage is homeopathic or synechdochal, like contagious magic. As

representations—records, images and faithful restorations—it is metaphorical, like sympathetic magic. Archeologists and art collectors may not believe that Buddha images have the power to cure diseases or bring rain, but they do believe them to possess vital powers. They ward off potent demons like Ignorance, Meaninglessness, Dullness and Ugliness. They make the world a better place. Lynne Meskell observes that many of those who come to see religious objects from other cultures in museums or heritage sites do so in an attitude of ‘quasi-ritual piety’.⁵⁶ With good reason, Donald Horne refers to heritage tourists as devotees of a cult.⁵⁷

So heritage conservation may be ‘modern’, but it is based on universal and deep-seated needs. People want to commemorate peak experiences—triumph, trauma, salvation. They value unusual and wonderful things, like virtuosic feats, exciting adventures, beautiful imaginings, rare jewels, imposing constructions and sublime landscapes. And they yearn for familiarity and comfort: reminders of their loved ones, known places, home foods, mother tongues, and everyday routines. The desire for heritage conservation stems from these diverse and implacable desires to commemorate, to be amazed, and to be comforted. That is what makes it so important, so absurd, so inspiring—and so dangerous. Byrne’s richly textured travelogue showed me all this with subtle clarity.

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—NOTES

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland and Other Poems*, Penguin, New York, 1998, p. 69.

² James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, p. 2.

- ³ Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit*, Marion Boyars, London, 1978; W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, Havill, London, 1998; Stephen Muecke, *No Road: Bitumen All the Way*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1997; Peter Robb, *Midnight in Sicily*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1997.
- ⁴ Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977; Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, Granta, London, 1992
- ⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Cape, London, 1973.
- ⁶ Denis Byrne, *Surface Collection: Archeological Travels in Southeast Asia*, AltaMira Press, Lanham MD, 2007, p. 59.
- ⁷ My favourite phrase describes concrete walls in Bali, 'cracked and discoloured by grey and green mold, which had spread in patterns that mapped underlying inconsistencies in the layer of render', Byrne, p. 68.
- ⁸ Rabinow, p. 5.
- ⁹ For the concept of 'thick' cosmopolitanism see Andrew Dobson, 'Thick Cosmopolitanism', *Political Studies*, vol. 54, pp. 165–84, 2006. Denis Byrne, 'Archaeology and the Fortress of Rationality' in Lynn Meskell (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Archeologies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009 provides a less oblique account of Byrne's position than *Surface Collection*.
- ¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2.
- ¹¹ Simon Leys (trans.), *The Analects of Confucius*, W.W. Norton, New York and London, 1997, p. 29, Analects 7.1.
- ¹² Neues Museum <<http://www.neues-museum.de/index.php?lang=en>>.
- ¹³ Matthew Hardy (ed.), *The Venice Charter Revisited: Modernism and Conservation in the Postwar World: Modernism, Conservation and Tradition in the 21st Century*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2008.
- ¹⁴ Burra Charter <<http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>>.
- ¹⁵ Denis Byrne, 'Partnerships in the Heritage of the Displaced', *Museum International*, no. 224, vol. 56, no. 4, 2004, p. 89.
- ¹⁶ World Heritage List <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>>.
- ¹⁷ Some idea of the extent of Australia's heritage activities can be gleaned by perusing the websites of the federal and state departments responsible for it, as well as those of the National Trust of Australia <<http://www.nationaltrust.org.au/>>, the Australian Heritage Council <<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/ahc/index.html>> and the Australian Heritage Magazine <<http://www.heritageaustralia.com.au/>>. See also Graeme Davison and Chris McConville (eds), *A Heritage Handbook*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1992; Tim Bonyhady, *Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, Politics, and Law*, North Sydney, 1993; Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Jane Lydon and Tracy Ireland (eds), *Object Lessons: Archeology and Heritage in Australia*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005; Michael Davis, *Writing Heritage: The Depiction of Indigenous Heritage in European-*

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¹⁹ For example, the *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor*, BWV 582.

²⁰ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. ix.

²¹ Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2005.

²² 'The collection of archaeological finds from disturbed ground surfaces', reads a definition of 'surface survey' I found on a popular web site, 'with the objective of gathering representative samples in order to establish the types of activity within the area examined', 'Surface Survey', *Answers.com*, <<http://www.answers.com/topic/surface-survey>>).

²³ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 138.

²⁴ Alphonso Lingis, 'The Rapture of the Deep' in *Excesses: Eros and Culture*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983, p. 27.

²⁵ *Surface Collection*, p. 27.

²⁶ Augusto Villalón, 'World Heritage Inscription and Challenges to the Survival of Community Life in Philippine Cultural Landscapes', in Jessica Brown, Nora J. Mitchell, Michael Beresford (eds), *The Protected Landscape Approach: Linking Nature, Culture, and Community*, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, Gland, Switzerland, 2005, pp. 103.

²⁷ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 52.

²⁸ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 122

²⁹ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 117.

³⁰ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 66.

³¹ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 106.

- ³² Shoban Saxena, 'Benazir larger-than-life-in-death', *Times of India*, Friday 22 February 2008, p. 9.
- ³³ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 122.
- ³⁴ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 125.
- ³⁵ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 139.
- ³⁶ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 48.
- ³⁷ Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras: A Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p. 39f.
- ³⁸ *Surface Collection*, p. 152, 154.
- ³⁹ *Surface Collection*, p. 167.
- ⁴⁰ Jonathan B. Tourtellot, 'Dictators "Defacing" Famed Burma Temples, Editor Says', *National Geographic Traveler*, 3 September 2004, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/09/0903_040903_travelwatch.html>; Andrew Harding, 'Burma Rebuilding risks Pagan jewel', BBC World News, 4 June 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4606759.stm>>.
- ⁴¹ *Surface Collection*, p. 168.
- ⁴² T. Patrick Burke, *The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts*, 2nd edition, Blackwell, Malden Mass, 1996, p. 72.
- ⁴³ Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, p. 66f.
- ⁴⁴ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (trans.), Penguin, New York, 1992, p. 56.
- ⁴⁵ Lyn Meskell, 'Divine Things' in Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew (eds), *Rethinking Materiality: The Engagement of Mind with the Material World*, McDonald Institute Monographs, University of Cambridge Press, Chicago, 2004, p. 250.
- ⁴⁶ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. xvi. The quoted phrase is from Lyn Meskell, *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt*, Berg, Oxford, 2004, p. 79.
- ⁴⁷ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, pp. 156, 157.
- ⁴⁸ Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, University of Chicago, Chicago & London, 2004.
- ⁴⁹ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Sacred as Secular*, Harper & Row, New York, 1972.
- ⁵⁰ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 73f.
- ⁵¹ Edward Gibbon made a no doubt debatable but renowned observation along these lines about religious pluralism in the pre-Christian Roman Empire. 'The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.' Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, abridged, ed. David Womersley, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 35.
- ⁵² Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 5.

- ⁵³ William A. Covina, *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994.
- ⁵⁴ Byrne, *Surface Collection*, p. 164.
- ⁵⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 1993, p. 54.
- ⁵⁶ Meskell, *Object Worlds*, p. 182.
- ⁵⁷ Donald Horne, *The Great Museum: The Re-presentation of History*, Pluto, 1984, p. 1.